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UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

MEMORANDUM FOR THE UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

SUBJECT : Joint CIA/DIA Memorandum Assessing
Present Viet Cong Military Capabilities

REFERENCE : USIB-M-383, item 6, 14 April 1965

1. The attached memorandum on the subject has been prepared by CIA and DIA as the response to the USIB's concurrence in the Chairman's request for such a paper at the Board meeting on 14 April (see reference minutes).

2. Accordingly, the attached assessment is circulated herewith for the information of the United States Intelligence Board.

JAMES S. LAY, JR.
Executive Secretary

Attachment

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CIA-DIA MEMORANDUM

An Assessment of Present
Viet Cong Military Capabilities

Introduction

This memorandum supplements a previous joint memorandum entitled "Strength of Viet Cong Military Forces in South Vietnam," issued 17 March 1965. The latter presented some rather disturbing conclusions regarding the growing strength of the Viet Cong, particularly in the northern provinces of South Vietnam, and the inadequacies of the ARVN. These conclusions remain generally valid. However, since mid-March there have been a number of developments affecting the strategic balance in South Vietnam. In particular there have been signs that the Viet Cong are feeling the effects of increased US military involvement in Vietnam. Despite these developments, we do not yet have evidence of a significant change in the Communist posture in South Vietnam, nor of a change in Viet Cong capability to increase sharply their military activity. This memorandum reassesses the military situation in South Vietnam taking these new factors into account.

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The Current Reduced Level of Viet Cong Activity

1. About early March, the tempo of Viet Cong activity began to decline and, for the past four weeks, has been well below normal. Since mid-March the weekly rate of Viet Cong - initiated incidents has not exceeded 450, as compared with the 1964 weekly average of about 550. Few actions in company strength or greater have been noted. The drop began the week after US jet strikes within South Vietnam were initiated on 19 February. The subsequent lull could mean that the strikes have confronted the Viet Cong with serious problems.

2. The lull, however, may also be due in large part to factors independent of recent US and South Vietnamese actions. Following their intensive post-Tet drive, which lasted through February, the Viet Cong may have required time to rest, evaluate, re-plan, and regroup. There is evidence that some units have been retraining in the use of newly acquired bloc weapons. There are also indications that some units have been deploying over distances as great as two or three provinces. These suggest preparations for new attacks, possibly to coincide with the rainy season in May. The nature and targets of such attacks could well be determined by recent US build-ups and the deployment of ARVN units.

3. The present military situation may bear some resemblance to the situation in late 1962 - early 1963 after the initial increase in US military aid to South Vietnam. Viet Cong activity generally showed a drop, but it is now apparent that the Communists were devoting considerable effort to assessing the new situation and devising tactics to meet it. Although parallel conditions may not now exist, the Viet Cong during that period also continued to expand their military forces, absorbing new infiltration and creating new units.

Effects of Air Strikes Directly Against the Viet Cong

4. During the past six weeks, Viet Cong casualties have remained high and in the two weeks ending on 10 April were significantly above average. Government troops have initiated most of the operations which produced these heavy casualties.

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To a considerable extent, recent government successes are attributed to increased air support. In some cases, the latter has assisted government troops in penetrating Viet Cong strongholds previously denied them. It is confirmed that a substantial proportion of recent Viet Cong casualties have been caused by air strikes.

5. Last week, a successful attack was mounted on the U Minh war zone in the delta. Also, a government foray into Zone D north of Saigon resulted in the seizure or destruction of large food and ammunition depots. On 15 April, a massive air assault was conducted in Tay Ninh Province in the area believed to serve the main Viet Cong headquarters. Ground follow-up indicates extensive damage to a Viet Cong complex which had consisted of over 100 permanent structures. The three operations above are believed likely to have disrupted Viet Cong timetables and, at least partially, some units.

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Effect on the Viet Cong of Air Strikes on North Vietnam and Laos

7. It is still too early to assess the degree to which air strikes conducted since 7 February against various targets in North Vietnam and Laos have affected the Viet Cong supply situation in the South. It seems likely that, thus far at least, the strikes have had more psychological than military effect on the Viet Cong.

8. Nevertheless, the knocking out of certain key bridges and the bombing of chokepoints such as the Mu Gia Pass have almost certainly caused some difficulties in moving supplies. Similarly, the harassing of convoys by armed reconnaissance missions undoubtedly adds to the difficulties of moving

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supplies, but we have no information from which we can really assess the over-all effect. Nevertheless, it appears that the movement of men and materiel continues; it would be virtually impossible to cut off all supply effort through the air strikes.

Infiltration from the North

9. The latest official compilation of total infiltration of personnel from North to South Vietnam during 1964 was reported by COMUSMACV on 17 April 1965. This compilation carried a total of 8,130 infiltrates in the confirmed, probable, and possible categories. Evidence of still additional infiltration during 1964 will probably develop and the final figure will probably be substantially higher.

10. So far, there is no hard evidence to indicate whether the 1964 infiltration rate is being maintained in 1965. There is usually a gap of at least three months, and often considerably longer, between the arrival of an infiltration group in South Vietnam and its detection. The fact that the infiltration communications network in South Vietnam, which is controlled from North Vietnam, is functioning normally at present suggests that infiltration is continuing. Truck traffic from North Vietnam into southern Laos is also continuing, according to reports from road watchers in the area. The intelligence community believes that a substantial part of the materiel carried into Laos via this method eventually reaches the Viet Cong in South Vietnam.

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12. The introduction of a regular PAVN unit into South Vietnam would indicate an intention by Hanoi to assume a more direct role in supporting Viet Cong military action in South Vietnam. A move in this direction by Hanoi was already evident in the reported infiltration to South Vietnam during

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1964 of substantial numbers of young, native-born North Vietnamese draftees and volunteers. Prior to 1964, almost all the infiltrators were southerners regrouped to the North in 1954-55.

The Manpower Situation

13. Evidence indicates that a number of Viet Cong main force units involved in recent engagements have a high percentage of infiltrated North Vietnamese draftees or of new South Vietnamese recruits.

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14. Up to the present, casualties suffered by the Viet Cong--numbering about 80,000 killed and captured from the beginning of 1962 through March of this year--have not prevented the growth of Viet Cong main force strength. The bulk of Viet Cong casualties probably comes, as do those of the government, from irregular forces, of which the Viet Cong have a roughly estimated 100,000.

15. Many seasoned main force units have not been reported engaged in the fighting of recent weeks, and are believed to be substantially intact. Available information rather suggests that those units which have suffered most heavily in the past few weeks may have been new ones. If true, however, this does suggest that much of the recent Viet Cong manpower increase may be more quantitative than qualitative. Furthermore, it suggests that the Viet Cong, like the government, has manpower problems.

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Viet Cong Weapons and Ammunition

16. The recent information also suggests that Viet Cong main force units are continuing to improve the quality of their armament. Units in all corps areas have been found to possess the new family of Chinese Communist 7.62-mm. weapons. According to [] some units in the delta have been so re-equipped only within the past two months. Viet Cong possession of 75-mm. pack howitzers is now accepted in several areas, and there may be some 105-mm. artillery pieces in the northern provinces. Most of these weapons were reported to be in South Vietnam before the interdiction effort against targets in North Vietnam began.

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17. The significance of this increasing use of bloc weapons may be twofold. It points to improved firepower, but also to increased dependence on outside supply. More intelligence is now available on the methods and routes of supply by sea, as well as overland, and in at least two cases, infiltration of weapons by sea has been disrupted. We assume that newly augmented coastal patrol efforts, with increased US participation, will complicate sea supply, but at this time we are unable to assess the degree to which the over-all Viet Cong supply position will be affected.

Viet Cong Morale

18. There are, however, other signs of Viet Cong difficulties, some of them developing well before the air strikes began in February. Populations in Viet Cong - dominated areas have been reported restive under increased taxation by the Communists in the past year. Military defections to the government have shown some increase, including over 400 in March and about 130 in the week ending 10 April. []

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21. Some of the current Viet Cong concentrations began to develop months before the US began tactical air strikes in South Vietnam and the attacks against North Vietnam. It is not possible on the basis of current evidence to determine whether the US air effort in both South Vietnam and the North has affected the planning which produced these concentrations. The Viet Cong may indeed feel under increased compulsion to demonstrate their strength at this time. The present lull may only indicate that further preparations for attacks are being carried out. In any case, Viet Cong efforts to erode government control in the countryside will continue and are likely to be stepped up.

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